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SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR S/CT, EAP/MLS, P, D  
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SUBJECT: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO UMM AL-QURA?

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Cambodia is home to approximately 320,000 Cham Muslims, the majority of whom belong to the Sunni Shafi'i school of Islam. From 1975-1979, the Khmer Rouge ruthlessly targeted the Cham, annihilating all but a few of the Islamic leaders, teachers, and scholars. In an effort to rebuild, Muslim communities eagerly accepted outside assistance. Cambodia is currently home to several non-profit Islamic organizations which receive tens of millions of dollars of support from Saudi, Kuwaiti, and other donors. In May 2004, the Saudi-supported Umm al-Qura Islamic school was shut down due to alleged ties to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) leader and 2002 Bali bombing mastermind, Hambali, who lived in Cambodia for approximately six months in 2002-2003. Subsequent to the forced closure of the school, 28 foreign Muslim teachers were deported by the Cambodian government. The school has since reopened and is home to over 670 Cham Muslim students who are taught both religious and secular subjects. END SUMMARY.

DECIMATION

12. (SBU) The Khmer Rouge targeted the Cham Muslims due to their religion, perceived difference from "pure" Khmer, and collective resistance to the regime. It is estimated that anywhere from thirty to fifty percent of the Cham population was murdered over the four year period from 1975-1979. According to research compiled by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), there were 300 Islamic religious teachers and 113 mosques in Cambodia in 1974. By 1980, those numbers were radically reduced to 38 and 5 respectively. In an effort to rebuild, Muslim communities readily accepted foreign assistance, making them more susceptible to outside influences.

BAD COMPANY

13. (SBU) These outside influences shot into the spotlight in May 2003 when the al Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah operations chief, Riduan Isamuddin (better known as Hambali) was arrested in Thailand. After it was revealed that he had spent time in Cambodia from September 2002 to February 2003, RGC police closed the Umm al-Qura school in the outskirts of Phnom Penh on suspicion of involvement with Hambali's terrorist group. Additionally 28 foreign teachers and staff members were deported by the government and three teachers (two of whom were from the Umm al-Qura school) were accused of plotting terrorist attacks against foreign diplomatic and other targets in Cambodia. In March 2008, the Cambodian

Supreme Court upheld the December 2004 life sentences of the three men - one Cambodian and two Thai nationals. Hambali, who was sentenced in absentia along with two others, remains in extrajudicial detention in Guantanamo Bay where he was taken after his 2003 arrest.

#### A NEW BEGINNING

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14. (SBU) Under the close supervision of the mufti, Oknha Sos Kamry, and scrutiny of the Prime Minister, the Umm al-Qura school was reopened in September 2004 as the "Cambodian Islamic Center" (CIC). In Cambodia, the mufti, who is appointed for life by the Prime Minister, serves as a legal and religious advisor and is the Muslim community's supreme leader. The CIC is part of the Sjiil Meunaga Ugama Annikmah Al Islamia (SMU) network, which consists of approximately 16 schools modeled after those run by the Malaysian Yayasan Islam Kelantan organization. The mufti informed Poloff in a December 1 meeting that the CIC is now home to approximately 600 male students hailing from all parts of Cambodia who both live and study at the school. An additional 70 female students study and live separately in the village. A low percentage of girls actually finish the four years of the SMU education at CIC due to familial obligations, and fewer still pass the final exam. However, a recent announcement by the government allowing Muslim students to wear traditional clothing, including headscarves, is expected to have a positive effect on female school attendance and completion.

15. (SBU) According to the mufti, the school accepts approximately 80-100 new students a year regardless of political affiliation. However, he estimates the majority of

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the students and families to be Cambodian People's Party supporters due to the reportedly high approval the Cham have for the ruling party. In an agreement made with the Prime Minister, in addition to religious studies CIC provides a secular education based on the national curriculum. Courses are taught in Khmer, however, many students speak Bahasa Malay and several also speak Arabic. All of the teachers can speak Malay, with 70% able to also read and write in the Malay language. Additionally, it is a requirement for teachers to know Arabic in order to teach the Koran. Arabic language classes are part of the curriculum. The majority of the current teachers received their training in Malaysia, with some trained in southern Thailand, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

16. (SBU) CIC relies heavily on donor support, including rice and monetary donations, from Cambodian Islamic communities. A yearly tuition of \$100 per student helps to offset the cost of running the school. According to the mufti, CIC does not receive any direct foreign assistance, nor does it employ foreign teachers. However, among the Cambodian foundations providing support to CIC is the Cambodian Muslim Development Foundation, run by Osman Hassan, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Labor, which reportedly receives substantial support from foreign donors including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. (NOTE: It is not clear if foreign private donors are being tapped to support the CIC. END NOTE.)

#### A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

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17. (SBU) After completing the four year program at CIC, approximately 25% of the students continue their education abroad, typically in Malaysia, Thailand or UAE. Domestic Muslim organizations such as the Cambodian Islamic Youth Association (CIYA) and the Cambodian Muslim Students Association (CAMSA) routinely provide or help facilitate scholarships for study abroad. Private colleges, such as the Al-Manar Islamic college in Malaysia, as well as the Islamic Development Bank also provide scholarships to Muslim students in Cambodia. Upon returning to Cambodia, the mufti stated

that the majority of the Cham Muslims open small businesses rather than become religious teachers due to low salaries. In this sense, they are contributing to the community by providing potential jobs and development, but do not directly contribute to the education of the Cham. The lack of experienced teachers and inability to provide decent salaries has resulted in a lower quality of education for those who only attend Islamic schools as compared to those attending national schools, which receive government funding.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although the CIC has a difficult history linked to terrorism, the reopening and calculated distancing from this past under the tutelage of Oknha Sos Kamry has resulted in one of the only Islamic high schools in Cambodia which also provides a secular education based on the national curriculum. Students must take both Islamic and national standard tests, providing them with a broader vision and more opportunities upon graduation. The Cambodian government has shown its willingness to recognize, accept and integrate its Muslim minority by overtures such as issuing a directive to allow Muslims to wear traditional clothing in schools. Furthermore, there are approximately 17 high-ranking Muslim politicians within the Cambodian government. Based on the CIC example, government funding of Islamic schools with the understanding that the school also provide a secular education could go a long way toward improving education levels among this historically marginalized Muslim community. However, despite providing a buffer between donors and the schools, government-controlled Islamic foundations which provide needed funds receive monetary donations from Middle Eastern sources, some with questionable intentions, a potential source of concern. END COMMENT.  
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